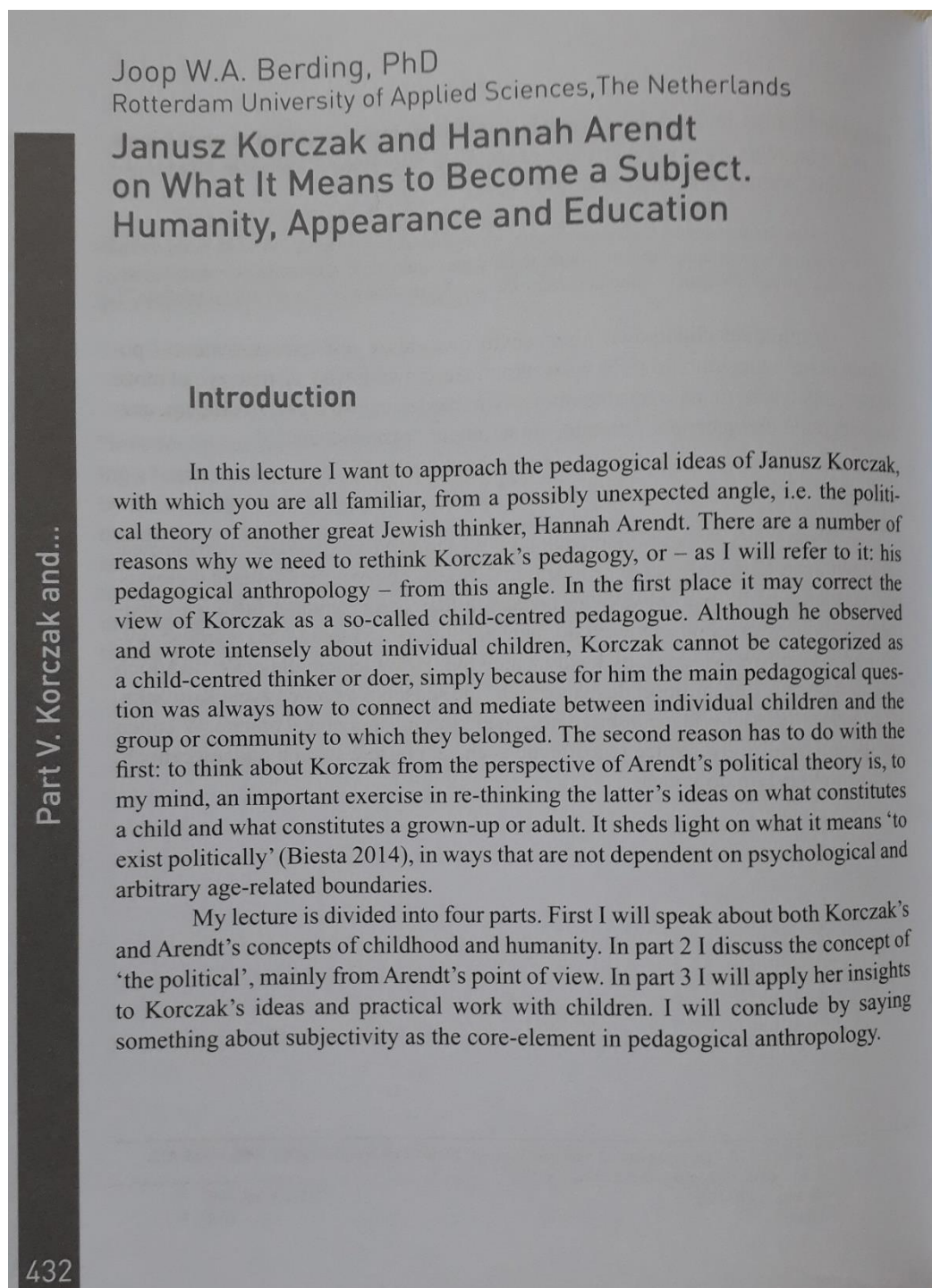


When you cite this please as follows:

Berding, J. (2018). Janusz Korczak and Hannah Arendt on what it means to become a subject. Humanity, appearance and education. In Michalak, M. (Ed.). *The rights of the child yesterday, today and tomorrow. The Korczak perspective. Part II* (pp. 432-449). Warsaw: Office of the Ombudsman for Children. (bi-lingual ed., English & Polish) Shown below is the English tekst.



1. Childhood and Humanity

I first discuss the ‘status’ of childhood as viewed by Korczak and Arendt respectively. Korczak, as we all know, saw the childhood of humans as a distinctive phase with a purpose in and for itself. In his books *How to Love a Child* (Korczak 1967) and *The Child's Right to Respect* (Korczak 1992a) and in many other works, also of fiction, such as *When I Am Little Again* (Korczak 1992b), he defended the right of the child to be who he is, and his right to the present day. This implies that it is not the task or the mission of the educator to change what is fundamental to any specific child. His famous quote here is:

“I may be able to create a tradition of truthfulness, tidiness, hard work, honesty and frankness, but I shall not be able to make any of the children other than what they are. A birch will stay a birch, an oak an oak, and a thistle a thistle. I may be able to rouse what is dormant in the soul, but I cannot create anything. It will be stupid of me to be annoyed with myself or the child” (Korczak 1967: 309).

Now I am sure you'll agree with me that this is one of those occasions on which Korczak crucially departs from what might be called the standard-paradigm of Western education, ever since Kant, Herbart and others postulated educability and proneness to formation as the core of the enlightened educational enterprise. But of course Korczak does *not* depart from what might be termed the self-formation of the child, for proof of which only one glance at the book of law he wrote for the children's court in his orphanage may suffice. Most of the sections or verdicts in this book are formulated in terms of self-awareness and self-betterment. And the endless patience Korczak showed toward children with very disturbing behaviour – the children we nowadays tend to label according to DSM-V – shows that he gave children as much time as they needed (Berding 2012). For him education was in essence to “begin to continue, continue to begin” (as the Arendtian scholar Revault d'Allonnes calls it; Revault d'Allonnes 2006). Korczak was very acutely aware of the fact that people, and this includes children, cannot be changed ‘from the outside’ so to speak. One can only change oneself. This is an important viewpoint in the topical movement of the ‘new authority’ (or ‘non-violent resistance’) developed by Haim Omer (Omer 2011), which is to my mind tributary to this fundamental pedagogical and anthropological insight of Korczak's.

Korczak's position on childhood is frequently summed up as ‘let the child be a child’. And although this sounds very nice, it is also hopelessly romantic, and

it lacks sensibility for the political, as I will show. Korczak was the first, as we all know, to correct this romantic, and even exalted view of the child. He knew that children had seen and knew adult life, including evil in some of its forms, and there are many examples of his utterly un-romantic way of dealing with this, e.g. the way he negotiates the stay of a big boy during the second summer camp. His message is simply: don't bully the younger children, leave them alone. Take it or leave it. The boy took it, and the agreement was acknowledged by a handshake – as between equals, as Korczak writes (1967: 361) No romanticism there, but rationalism of a very Kantian sort.

Hannah Arendt, on the other hand, saw nothing in childhood as a phase in itself, but regarded it as a preparation for adulthood. In her still stunning and provocative essay from the 1950s, "The Crisis in Education" (Arendt 2006) she embarks on what might be called a 'mission' to save education, and to her mind also, the nation, from the hands of what she calls 'the progressives' or alternatively, 'the pragmatists'¹. She blames them for having created separate worlds between children and adults, and having put all their hopes, not on adult authority – as they should have – but on the children's collective. However, Arendt considers these collectives without authority more prone to authoritarianism and totalitarianism than groups that are led by well-informed, well-educated adults who take their responsibility. Of course, Arendt does not mention Korczak and/or his work in the orphanage. Had she considered them, the term 'the children's republic', by which it was known, would probably have appalled her. 'Children' – meaning not-yet adults – and 'republic' – meaning the way in which adults take up their responsibility for the common causes in their community – simply do not match in her world-view. In her political theory – most prominently presented in her book *The Human Condition* (or *Vita activa*) (Arendt 1959), though a glimpse of it may be seen in the essay I just mentioned – Arendt makes a sharp distinction between the world of children and their education, and the world of adults and their politics. Or I should rather say: the world in which adults appear as political actors. I will elaborate on this later. In the meantime we may conclude that there is a sharp difference between the two with regard to the meaning of childhood.

This has implications for their respective views on what it means to be (a) human. As we know Korczak famously stated: "Children do not become humans, they already are" (Korczak 1991: 103). I have always wondered if this is a 'deep' philosophical thought or just a platitude. What else might come from a human than

¹ Without mentioning John Dewey's name, Arendt's essay contains a massive attack on his (alleged) position on education (Berding 2016b).

a (new) human? Arendt is more reticent on this issue: a child is in the process of *becoming* a human. To be able to appear as (a) human does not depend on the person himself of herself, but is more dependent on others, i.e. the willingness of others to acknowledge one in his or her humanity². I think Korczak did not advocate a view of the humanity of the child, apart or dissociated from the human community. Throughout his work we find his emphasis on the importance of community, of sharing, of communication, of deliberating on matters, on communal celebrating, and of caring for each other (the crucial aspect of respect: to look after one another), etc. (Berding 2013).

Although the two have different views on the status of childhood and on what it means to be or to become (a) human, these views do not necessarily contradict each other. In fact I think they may in a sense correct and supplement each other. In order to illuminate this, I will now focus on Arendt's idea of the political, and subsequently show what this means for a new understanding of Korczak's pedagogical practices.

2. The Political

Arendt might be called the champion of distinctions (Arendt 1959). In her philosophical and political works (here is a distinction in itself, about which Arendt was very clear; cf. Gaus 2013) she made numerous distinctions, as if to show that uni-dimensional concepts such as 'life' do not cover what we, humans, stand for and experience. First of all there is a clear distinction between doing and thinking. Doing takes place in the world, and concerns happenings in this world, 'outside' of myself so to speak. Thinking on the other hand takes one out of the world, and to the inner self. Thinking occurs when one wants, as Arendt calls it, to deliberate with oneself about his or her conduct. One might call this function 'conscience', or as Socrates did, call it the '2-in-1 principle' of me talking to myself (Arendt 1978).

Within the realm of doing Arendt also makes distinctions: between what she calls labour, work, and acting. These are forms of activity that involve very different types of human experience. *Labour* has to do with our biological make-up, with the cyclical processes of give-and-take, with nature, with consumption. These take place in the 'private' sphere, so to speak, literally in the dark. As human beings we

² The topicality and incisiveness of what it means to be human – to be acknowledged as a human – can be seen in the debate on refugees and human rights.

share these processes with all living organisms, and although they are fundamental they do not define us as humans.

Work – i.e. the production of solid goods such as a table or a bridge, but also of books, and other cultural artefacts – brings stability into the world. When we arrive as newcomers – as babies that is –, we enter a very old world that contains goods that were there long before we arrived, and many of them will probably be there after we leave. To make something means to have a clear goal in mind; for instance, I want to make a chair whose purpose it is to sit upon. The product/ion is defined by an ends-means relationship, it is linear, and when there is a finished product, that is it. Making things is extremely important, but a thing in itself does not produce meaning. That is what humans do, by giving objects a place in their way of living together.

This brings us to *acting*, and especially – to speaking, deliberating and negotiating with each other. This is what Arendt thinks makes us distinctly human. It has no end... word after word after word. As acting beings, humans appear before each other, not as a means to an end, not as objects, but as *subjects*. Now why would people appear before each other? They do so, says Arendt, in order to discuss matters and issues that are important to everyone in the community. The way the ancient Greeks in their *polis* handled public affairs serves as a model for her. What is important here, however, is not the historical form but the actual content: acting together – ‘in concert’ as Arendt calls it – means that while being equal everyone can appear in his or her uniqueness. This is what Arendt describes as *plurality*: we are all equal in the fact that we are all different. And when we come together to deliberate on matters of mutual interest, everyone from his or her perspective has a contribution to make, that cannot be replaced by anyone else. Arendt uses the metaphor of the ‘table of the world’, around which everyone is seated, each in his or her own place, with a unique view of the world and of each other. Arendt concludes that when people come together to ‘act’ they are free. Freedom in this sense is not something inward and individual; it is something that is temporarily achieved when people act in common, and then abandoned again, till a new occasion arises to gather together.

3. Korczak as a Political Pedagogue

For Arendt, as I said, politics and philosophy, politics and education, have nothing to do with each other; they belong to different 'realms'. That may be so, but I want to stretch this a little. For to my mind, Korczak is a great example of pedagogy as political acting. And I am sure you'll understand that I do not mean political in the narrow sense of party-political, but in the broad sense Arendt attached to this concept. In short: humans become political actors when they enter into conversation with each other, and deliberate about issues that concern them all. Now the crux of the matter is that this conversation takes place in public, and excludes, in principle, no one. To act is to take initiative, to begin something new and unexpected, to step out of the darkness of the private into the public and common world, and to be exposed in the public light. To act means *to appear in the world*.

Now let's take fresh look at Korczak. For instance, his adventures at the summer camp show how he and his pupils were first locked up within themselves, cramped into roles that did not fit. Or rather, they fitted some of them, especially the verbally abusive and violent among the pupils. But the community as a whole suffered from it. When there were conflicts between two children, Korczak took them to a small room, in order to sort it out. He avoided the public eye; only the ones directly involved took part in these meetings. Later he instituted a children's court in embryonic form. It consisted of three children, and he took the deliberations outdoors, to the forest. This was already a major step forward, in the direction and the form of the children's court later in the orphanage. The crucial difference between the experiments in the summer camp and in Dom Sierot is that Korczak realised that when there is a conflict between two (or a very small number of) children, this not only affects them, but the entire community. I believe this is the great lesson that we can learn from Korczak: not only the damage done to individuals needs to be repaired, and faith, and good relations between them must be restored, but also the damage done to the community as a whole needs to be reconciled. According to Korczak, the community cannot tolerate injustice, and therefore it needs to discuss these things in public. Matters that are important to the *res-publica*, the common good, must be made visible to the public eye, they must be taken out of the 'darkness' of the private and the arbitrary, and they must be judged upon according to public – which also means: *published* – standards, and via procedures that are open, transparent and impartial. Even though the orphanage was in some respects a shel-

tered and gated community, it nevertheless was a place with public spaces. And in these spaces not the law of the jungle applied, but the law of respect.

This is, you will agree, a totally different way of dealing than is still common practice. Mostly when there are conflicts, the teacher or group leader intervenes, takes the opponents apart, has a discussion (if any) and, mostly, that is it. There is no real healing process, and certainly not one that involves the whole group. My main point here is that the way Korczak deals with conflicts, the way he took them out of the darkness – the darkness of verbal abuse and violence – and into the light, there for all to see, and to judge, matches precisely Arendt's definition of human acting, and therefore the political. He made it possible for children to appear – literally and metaphorically – as subjects: subjected to the law of respect and plurality.

4. Conclusion

What I have discussed served two purposes: on the one hand I tried to get a deeper view of Korczak's educational practices by examining their political nature; on the other hand I used the concept of 'the political' proposed by Arendt that she herself restricted to the world of adults. I stretched the latter as part of an effort to 'politicise' Korczak, and with him education in the broader sense. What both share – as thinkers of the human and the child's condition – is a radical openness toward the subjectivity – not the identity – of humans. By appearing before the children's court, the pupils in Korczak's orphanage were acknowledged in their subjectivity – their 'subject(ed)ness' – but this was only made possible by Korczak himself. He negated Arendt's criticism of self-governing children's communities by positioning himself as a safeguard for the law of respect (Berding, 2016a, p. 21-22). Korczak's law of respect *is* Arendt's 'law of the earth', which stands for the inescapability of plurality: the fact that although we are different, we each have the right to exist, and to strive for what we consider to be good. Because of the fact that many things can be considered as 'good', arguments and conflicts almost inevitably arise. Both Korczak and Arendt choose deliberation, not violence, as the way out.

The most important implication of the above is that in education we should not focus on identity – on what the child *is* – but on subjectivity: on how the child appears to me, at this moment, temporarily. And this leads to the conclusion that political existence should not be defined by age (or social class, or gender, or anything else that fixates), but by openness towards the new and the unexpected. Precisely

this characterises the unpredictability of human acting, and the sense of wonder one can get from communicating with others.

I think this is what politics in the Arendtian sense is about, and what Korczak was practising in his orphanage.

References

Arendt, H. (1959). *The Human Condition*. New York: Doubleday.

Arendt, H. (1978). *Thinking. The Life of the Mind*. New York: HBJ.

Arendt, H. (2006). The Crisis in Education. In: *Between Past and Future*, 170-193. New York etc.: Penguin Classics.

Berding, J. (2012). The First Annual Report and the First Annual Children's Rights Monitor of the Dutch Children's Ombudsman: Some Reflections from a Korczakian Point of View. In: P. Jaros (ed.). *2012 Janusz Korczak Year. An International Perspective on Children's Rights and Pedagogy. A Selection of Lectures Presented during the Korczak Seminars Organized by Polish Diplomatic Missions Abroad in 2012*, 31-37. Warsaw: Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Poland.

Berding, J. (2013). Becoming a Citizen. The Inspiration of Janusz Korczak. In: G.A. Krehl & R. Godel-Gassner (Hsg.). *Facettenreich im Fokus – Janusz Korczak und seine Pädagogik*. Historische und aktuelle Perspektiven, 381-388. Jena: Garmond Verlag.

Berding, J. (2016a). Janusz Korczak: An Introduction. URL: <http://members.ziggo.nl/jwa.berding/Janusz%20Korczak%20an%20introduction%20Joop%20Berding%20Oct%202016.pdf>. (accessed 20th October 2017)

Berding, J. (2016b). "Ik ben ook een mens." *Opvoeding en onderwijs aan de hand van Korczak, Dewey en Arendt*. Culemborg: Phronese. URL: www.uitgeverijphronese.nl/?p=175

Biesta, G. (2014). *The Beautiful Risk of Education*. Boulder, CO/London: Paradigm Publishers.

Gaus, G. (2013). "What Remains? The Language Remains": A Conversation with Günter Gaus. In *Hannah Arendt: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, 1-38. Brooklyn, NY: Melville Publishing House.

Korczak, J. (1967). *Selected Works of Janusz Korczak* (M. Wolins, ed.). Washington, DC.: National Science Foundation.

Korczak, J. (1991). *Von der Grammatik und andere pädagogische Texte*. Heinsberg: Agentur Dieck.

Korczak, J. (1992a). *The Child's Right to Respect* (E.P. Kulawiec, transl.). Lanham etc.: University Press of America.

Korczak, J. (1992b). *When I Am Little Again* (E.P. Kulawiec, transl.). Lanham etc.: University Press of America.

Omer, H. (2011). *The New Authority : Family, School, and Community*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Revault d'Allonnes, M. (2006). *Le pouvoir des commencements. Essai sur l'autorité*. Paris: Seuil.